

2016

Best Friends National Conference

Playbook



No-Kill Community:

What Worked, What Didn't,
What's Next

**Palm Springs,
California**



Table of Contents

Introduction	2
Volunteer program	5
Foster guardian program	6
Transport program	7
Adoption program	8
Community cat program	10
Fix a Friend program	12
Friends Pet Food Bank	13
Socialization and enrichment programs	14
Marketing and branding	16
Retention programs and efforts	17
Love Fund	19
Intake numbers	19
Teaching hospital	20
Relationship with animal control	20
Humane legislation	21
Presenters	22



This playbook is one in a series meant to be used as guides as you explore how you can save more lives in your community. Getting to no-kill isn't a one-size-fits-all proposition. Each community is unique, with its own challenges and resources, so the playbooks highlight a variety of communities and detail the various ways that leaders in those communities progressed to no-kill or have their communities firmly on that path. Of course, there are some common denominators: Collaboration, commitment, hard work and data-driven approaches to problem-solving are some of the factors that have taken these communities to lifesaving levels once believed to be unreachable. We hope that you will find the information in the playbooks helpful and inspirational as your community works to **Save Them All®**.

Key participant in helping the community to become no-kill:

- Friends of Palm Springs Animal Shelter

Some keys to Palm Springs' success:

- Having the right people on the team, including board members, staff and volunteers
- Gaining the support of the community via fundraising, adoptions and volunteer recruitment
- Developing and maintaining strategic partnerships with rescue groups, foundations and other agencies
- Marketing the shelter and programs in a way that is positive and honest
- Learning from colleagues in the animal welfare world and embracing the concept of continuous improvement
- Being tenacious, fearless and determined to help the animals

City of Palm Springs

2008 save rate:	50%
2015 save rate:	92.4%



Introduction

The beautiful resort city of Palm Springs, California, draws visitors and part-time residents from all over the world and is a dreamy desert oasis for many. Palm Springs has a lot to boast about, but not so long ago, the city's animal shelter was definitely not on the list of things to be proud of. Built in 1960, when the city's population was just 13,000, the shelter became woefully inadequate as the city grew. Palm Springs now has a population of 48,000 full-time residents and thousands of part-time "snowbirds." Most residents avoided visiting the shelter because of the depressing environment and heartbreaking sight of so many animals crammed into such a small space.

Friends of the Palm Springs Animal Shelter (FoPSAS) had been providing financial support to the shelter since 1996 and had made minor improvements to the outdated facility, but FoPSAS knew it simply wasn't enough. The animals — and the citizens of Palm Springs — deserved better. Working with the city, FoPSAS raised enough funds to help build a new state-of-the-art shelter, completed in 2011. But FoPSAS also knew that a community requires more than a fabulous building to truly save lives; it takes the right team of people to run it and the support of an engaged and committed community to sustain it. So in 2012, FoPSAS entered into a partnership with the city to run the shelter. The results have been remarkable.

In late 2008, Tamara Hedges joined the FoPSAS board of directors after moving to Palm Springs from San Francisco and Los Angeles. She was appalled that the city shelter was so small, so dilapidated and so underfunded. A longtime animal advocate, Tamara was energized, though, by the camaraderie and enthusiasm of fellow animal advocates in the community, including her colleagues on the FoPSAS board. Tamara and other board members convinced the city to allow FoPSAS to develop a volunteer program focused on helping the small shelter staff care for the animals and to help increase adoptions through off-site adoption events and fostering.

In many municipal shelters, the true hardships and challenges of operating a public shelter are not seen by the general public. As Tamara began spending more time at the shelter, she realized that FoPSAS's concept of a humane, compassionate shelter did not align with the shelter staff's ideas about how the shelter should be run. FoPSAS believes that every animal deserves the very best of care and that every effort should be made to find the right home for each pet. In addition, FoPSAS and the shelter staff had different perspectives on who was adoptable and who wasn't.

"Changing the culture at a public shelter that has been underfunded and essentially overlooked for decades is no easy task," says Tamara, who's now vice president of FoPSAS. "The temptation is to assign labels — good guys and bad guys. But the truth is, we are all responsible for what happens at our public shelters. Each of us has a role to play, whether it's as a volunteer, foster guardian, donor, adopter, advocate, activist or simply a concerned, informed citizen. We can't sit around shaking our heads and lamenting about how terrible things are at our local shelter and expect anything to change. We have to become personally

involved in creating real and sustainable change, sometimes going way outside our comfort zones to get the attention and support of decision makers.”

To initiate that change, FoPSAS began to meet regularly with city officials to construct a plan that would provide better care to animals and better service to the residents of Palm Springs. Already in process and at the top of the list was a new facility, which would provide not only the space needed for a community the size of Palm Springs, but also a clean and modern building and a welcoming experience for those visiting the shelter. Both FoPSAS and city officials realized, of course, that more than a new building was needed. Lifesaving programs had to be implemented.



The process of negotiating significant changes at the shelter had begun when the city of Palm Springs and FoPSAS were both hit with a lawsuit from the Animal Legal Defense Fund (ALDF). The lawsuit was initiated by a couple of local animal advocates who were as concerned as FoPSAS was about the quality of care at the shelter. The lawsuit centered on the use of the term “no-kill.”

Several of the FoPSAS board members were longtime ALDF supporters and were stunned that not only were they facing the monumental task of improving conditions at the Palm Springs shelter, they had to deal with a lawsuit that required a great deal of time, energy and funding. However, as is often the case, trying times can bring about unexpected rewards. FoPSAS understood that ALDF and the plaintiffs shared the same goal,

helping to save the lives of animals in Palm Springs, and the lawsuit was settled quickly, allowing FoPSAS to once again focus on building the new shelter and bringing about positive changes at the shelter.

Along with fundraising for the new shelter, FoPSAS focused on building up the fledgling volunteer and foster programs, believing that both were essential to saving lives. When the new shelter building opened in 2011, city staff were still running shelter operations, but under a new shelter director, who also headed up animal control services.

Several months after the new shelter opened, it became apparent that allowing a nonprofit to run it would be the best course of action for the city, giving the shelter the ability to operate with more flexibility, efficiency, creativity and transparency, and a lot less bureaucracy. In 2012, the city put out a request for proposals for shelter operation services. FoPSAS sought advice from sheltering expert Scotlund Haisley and his organization, Animal Rescue Corps, to help craft a proposal that would put the shelter on the fast track to being a facility run in a humane and compassionate way.

It was a very anxious time for FoPSAS; they so desperately wanted to roll up their sleeves and get down to the business of saving lives. To their relief, the city awarded the five-year contract to FoPSAS and, finally, in November 2012, FoPSAS officially took over operation of the shelter. Most of the city employees took positions with other city departments, taking their institutional knowledge with them. Only a couple of the animal care staff took positions under the FoPSAS contract. While this situation made the learning curve incredibly steep, in hindsight it was a good thing because it allowed for a fresh start and a sense of focused determination.

When building a successful organization, getting the right people on the team is the most important and most challenging step, Tamara says. Despite knowing this, FoPSAS didn't always get it right; they had two shelter directors before finally hiring their current director of operations and veterinary services, Dr. Shayda Ahkami. Before being hired as shelter director, Shayda was a volunteer veterinarian for FoPSAS, donating her time for spay/neuter surgeries and special medical cases, and then she was a board member for a year. A longtime animal advocate, she has the passion, commitment and expertise that make her a perfect fit for the job. Under her leadership, the quality of animal care has increased to the very highest standard, comparable to an established, quality veterinary clinic. Adoptions and transports have increased, customer service has been boosted, and the staff is blossoming.

"When you believe 100 percent in your mission, you gather courage and energy that you never knew you had," Tamara says. "You attract others to join the cause and inspire allies. Miracles start to happen. The right people begin to show up at the right time, just when you need them most: to transport a litter of kittens to a foster guardian in the middle of the night, to write a check to pay for a critical surgery, to adopt that dog who has been waiting for months for a loving home."





Volunteer program

FoPSAS's volunteer program began in 2009 at the old facility. Working with the police department and animal control officers to put together a basic volunteer program, FoPSAS started with just six dedicated and tenacious volunteers. The program has grown by leaps and bounds over the past seven years to become what it is today, a crucial component of the FoPSAS organization, providing support in nearly every area of the shelter. FoPSAS volunteers work in customer service, animal care and enrichment, medical care, placement services, event management, development, humane education, community outreach (TNR and Fix a Friend), marketing and information technology.

As the volunteer base grew, it became apparent that FoPSAS needed a staff volunteer coordinator. Getting the right person in this position is critical; it isn't enough to hire someone with good technical and organizational skills. FoPSAS discovered that the volunteer coordinator must have superb people skills, must truly like people (all personality types) and must have the ability to not only attract volunteers but retain them as well.

Last year, FoPSAS's 300 volunteers donated more than 40,000 hours to the organization, the equivalent of nearly 20 full-time employees. The success of FoPSAS is directly tied to the strength, commitment and loyalty of their volunteer base.

WHAT WORKED

- Investing resources in the volunteer program and offering several areas of volunteer engagement
- Providing a thorough volunteer orientation and training modules
- Creating a team environment so that staff and volunteers can work collaboratively in all areas of shelter operations
- Giving volunteers the skills and tools they need to be successful in their positions and a safe, open platform to express their observations and experiences as a volunteer

WHAT DIDN'T WORK

- Trying to run a volunteer program without a staff volunteer coordinator

WHAT'S NEXT

- Building capacity within the volunteer program through training in order to strengthen the knowledge and skill level of volunteers, and continuing to attract volunteers who are passionate advocates for homeless pets



Foster guardian program

In 2011, while the old facility was still in operation, it became evident to FoPSAS that a foster program was desperately needed for very young animals, senior animals, animals who were recovering from illness or injury, and those who were very shy or needed some quiet time and the calm of a home environment to put their best paw forward. FoPSAS also realized that volunteers and community members couldn't be expected to know about the urgent need for foster homes. They had to make a plea, a very loud and somewhat desperate plea at times, to communicate that the shelter was filled to capacity and they had animals who needed to get into homes that very day.

As with the volunteer program, FoPSAS worked closely with the city shelter staff to develop a basic foster program, writing policies, procedures and guidelines. And like the volunteer program, the foster program has grown to become an essential part of everyday operations, increasing the number of pets that the shelter can accommodate and providing countless hours of love and focused attention for animals with the greatest needs.

In 2015, 157 foster guardians cared for 866 animals and that number is sure to grow in 2016. FoPSAS foster guardians are extraordinarily dedicated, and some of them foster animals year-round, explaining that their house no longer feels like a home without a foster dog or cat in it. One volunteer who specializes in feline hospice care has taken in more than 20 hospice cats over the past five years.

WHAT WORKED

- Creating a structured program that provides policies, procedures and training around how to care for neonatal kitties and puppies, nursing mothers with litters, senior and hospice pets, shy dogs and cats, and dogs with more severe behavioral issues, as well as protocols for foster guardians to follow after hours
- Providing all of the food, litter and medical supplies needed for each foster pet, which makes fostering more feasible for people with financial limitations
- Marketing the program in a variety of ways — through social media, a newsletter, newspaper ads, a local morning TV news segment and e-blasts

WHAT DIDN'T WORK

- Expecting volunteers and community members to know that FoPSAS needed foster homes

WHAT'S NEXT

- Partnering with the Riverside County shelter and local rescue groups within the No Kill Coachella Valley coalition to develop a shared foster guardian pool, identify foster guardians with particular expertise, and utilize centralized communication with and coordination of foster guardians



Transport program

The transport program began when FoPSAS took over operation of the shelter in 2012. Best Friends Animal Society was one of their first transport partners, which was important since transporting their pets to another rescue group was a somewhat frightening option for FoPSAS at first. How could they be sure that the animals they had come to know and love would be in good hands with a rescue group hundreds, maybe even thousands, of miles away? Knowing that Best Friends would certainly provide excellent care to the animals helped FoPSAS to make the leap.

Since then, FoPSAS has been fortunate to work with solid, reliable transport partners, most of whom are north of Palm Springs in Oregon, Washington and Canada. FoPSAS also works with a handful of Southern California groups, including a couple of local ones. Unfortunately, though, local rescue groups rarely pull from the Palm Springs shelter, saying that they know the animals are safe there. While this is true, FoPSAS would welcome more local help during peak seasons when the shelter is overflowing.

Another disappointment was attempting to use professional transport companies to move animals. Following the model that many other public shelters use, FoPSAS initially contracted with professional pet transporting companies to transport their animals to rescue partners. Although there were no crises or disasters, there were some frustrating and anxiety-producing experiences that have led FoPSAS to rely instead on staff and vetted volunteers for ground transportation.

WHAT WORKED

- Increasing the placement team staff so that adequate focus could be given to building relationships with rescue groups
- Coordinating the logistics of transfers
- Utilizing volunteers to transport animals

WHAT DIDN'T WORK

- Using professional transport companies to move animals

WHAT'S NEXT

- Partnering with the Riverside County shelter and local rescue groups within the No Kill Coachella Valley coalition on long-distance transports, sharing costs, labor and expertise



Adoption program

When the shelter was run by the city at the old facility, there was very little space to sit and have a private chat with a potential adopter. Even worse, dogs were not taken out of the kennel to interact with potential adopters. Cats could only be touched through the cage or if a staff member was around to open the cage, which was infrequent. These limitations, coupled with the dark, dank and depressing atmosphere of the facility, resulted in a low number of adoptions.

Once FoPSAS developed a fledging volunteer team in 2009, however, interaction between the animals and potential adopters increased — and so did the number of adoptions. To encourage cat adoptions, FoPSAS built a small cat socialization area in the old facility where prospective adopters could sit and get to know the cats. In addition, with the help of local businesses and a great deal of volunteer sweat equity, FoPSAS built a small dog park next to the old shelter so dogs could get out of their kennels to run and play and meet people interested in adopting. In fact, FoPSAS took it a step further, encouraging potential adopters to bring their own dogs into the play yard for supervised meet-and-greet sessions to help ensure a good match.

When FoPSAS began operating the shelter in 2012 in the new facility, they took full advantage of the adoption promotions offered to Best Friends No More Homeless Pets Network partners, attracting adopters with the catchy and clever tag lines. FoPSAS continues to take advantage of the Best Friends promotions today, and also holds a variety of special events of their own, sometimes focused on adopting out certain animals, such as kittens, puppies, seniors or special-needs pets.

Initially, FoPSAS was hesitant to go very low on adoption fees, but they soon realized that smart matchmaking and solid, thorough counseling are the keys to successful adoptions. They also learned that offering low fees, or even free adoptions, during special promotions were excellent ways to convince would-be adopters that the time was right to visit the shelter. After all, everyone loves a deal and adopters can buy lots of special treats and goodies with the money they save on adoption fees.

FoPSAS advertises the availability of its adoptable animals extensively, utilizing social media, press releases, radio, television and city council meetings to help get the word out. In addition, understanding that many potential adopters will not enter a shelter, FoPSAS organizes mobile adoption events at the local Petco and at special community events.

One of the biggest challenges at the Palm Springs shelter is adopting out larger dogs, most of them pit bull terriers, who tend to stay at the shelter for a long time. These dogs win the hearts of the FoPSAS team, and staff and volunteers find it difficult to see them passed over day after day. FoPSAS is working hard to place these dogs, reaching out to rescue groups, foster guardians and potential adopters. In the meantime, keeping these special dogs happy

and healthy (via long walks, play groups, special treats, tender words and kisses on the nose) is a priority, one embraced by the board, staff and volunteers.

WHAT WORKED

- Offering low-cost, all-inclusive adoption fees or free adoptions
- Having a thorough but friendly adoption process and offering lifetime support to adopters via medical or training services
- Eliminating the fear or shame of returning a pet if the match isn't right
- Marketing adoptable animals through special promotions on social media and other outlets
- Conducting mobile adoptions

WHAT DIDN'T WORK

- Having a long, investigative-style adoption process

WHAT'S NEXT

- Continuing to build community awareness about how truly amazing shelter pets are and changing negative perceptions about particular breeds
- Continuing to have a welcoming, supportive environment for potential adopters and visitors





Community cat program

Before FoPSAS became actively involved in shelter operations, there was no trap-neuter-return (TNR) program in Palm Springs. Residents had no local resource to help them get community (aka feral or stray) cats spayed or neutered. Instead, they would have to drive the cats to rescue clinics outside of the city or to local vets, who generally did not offer reduced spay/neuter fees.

Tamara had been part of the TNR program at the San Francisco SPCA, and she and fellow board member Tanya Petrovna decided that Palm Springs cats needed their help. FoPSAS's first TNR effort, in July 2011, was in a condominium community, where a petite mother cat was found with four young kittens. The mother was spayed, vaccinated, ear-tipped and released back into the complex, and the kittens were fostered and socialized by Tamara before she found homes for each of them.

Implementing the TNR program had its challenges at first. FoPSAS learned that it's ineffective to simply show up with traps whenever there's a call and offer to trap, neuter and return the cats. Some people consider the cats a nuisance. They are bothered by the sight, smell and sounds of outdoor cats and just want them to go away. So, FoPSAS community cat staff and volunteers must be patient, listen without judgment to people's viewpoints, and employ persuasive negotiation and conflict resolution skills when interacting with the public. FoPSAS found out that capturing hearts and minds is as critical as capturing the cats.

Today, FoPSAS's community cat program is a model for the Coachella Valley. The city of Palm Springs contributes \$30,000 annually to the program, which helps to fund a part-time TNR coordinator. FoPSAS also receives grants for TNR, including a grant from Best Friends, and private donations that allow them to offer free and low-cost spay/neuter and vaccinations to community cats in Palm Springs and throughout the entire Coachella Valley. The TNR volunteer crew is a tenacious, determined bunch who spend a great deal of time lurking in bushes at dusk and dawn to trap cats for TNR. They know that TNR is a numbers game: The more cats fixed, the more lives saved.

WHAT WORKED

- Having a dedicated group of volunteers who are committed to saving community cats
- Hiring a part-time TNR coordinator to manage the volunteers and the program
- Scheduling TNR surgery days and negotiating spay/neuter fees

WHAT DIDN'T WORK

- Expecting the public to get on board with the TNR program immediately

WHAT'S NEXT

- Building capacity within the TNR team and expanding the program beyond Palm Springs through fundraising and via strategic partnerships within the No Kill Coachella Valley coalition





Fix a Friend program

Palm Springs is a city of contrasts: Extremely wealthy developments and country clubs lie within half a mile of underserved, low-income neighborhoods. In 2015, knowing that lack of funds or lack of transportation (and sometimes both) are the primary reasons that people do not spay or neuter their pets, FoPSAS developed the Fix a Friend program, offering low-cost and free spay/neuter, vaccinations and microchips at their shelter and through partner mobile clinics.

FoPSAS advertised the availability of Fix a Friend through both social media channels and grassroots marketing. The social media posts quickly put FoPSAS in the position of having a waiting list. But grassroots neighborhood canvassing — going door-to-door and posting flyers at churches, businesses and community centers — was also necessary, since not everyone in the targeted underserved neighborhoods has access to social media.

This program has been incredibly effective, attracting low-income people with pets from all over the Coachella Valley. The program is funded through grants and private donations.

WHAT WORKED

- Offering affordable and accessible spay/neuter services in the shelter and via a mobile unit
- Doing both social media and grassroots advertising to get the word out about the program
- Partnering with community organizations to provide information about the program to their members and constituents

WHAT DIDN'T WORK

- Relying on social media alone to get the word out to underserved neighborhoods

WHAT'S NEXT

- Adding a transportation component to the program, knowing that once the financial hurdle is removed, providing transportation to both the shelter clinic and mobile sites is the next step



Friends Pet Food Bank

The Friends Pet Food Bank began in 2014 when a generous donor stepped up to provide seed money to help feed the pets of seniors and people suffering from major economic hardship or illness. For some of these people, their pets are their only family. The \$25,000 challenge gift was matched and the pet food bank was up and running, utilizing partnerships with the local senior center and the AIDS Assistance Program for distribution. Now housed off-site in a city-owned facility, the food bank is run primarily by volunteers, with a part-time staff member providing coordination and oversight.

WHAT WORKED

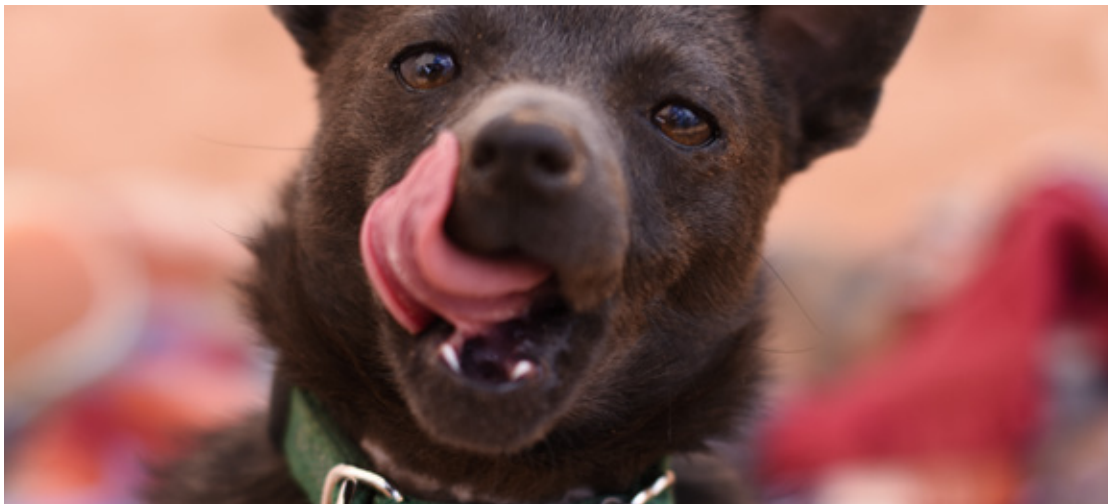
- Using volunteers to run the program
- Getting community support through food drives
- Vetting recipients through Meals on Wheels and other partner agencies

WHAT DIDN'T WORK

- Trying to run the program out of the shelter, which has limited storage space

WHAT'S NEXT

- Expanding partnerships to other organizations so FoPSAS can reach the pets of the homeless and others who are struggling
- Increasing the public's awareness of the program and conveying how critical food donations are to the success of the food bank





Socialization and enrichment programs

When it comes to enrichment for dogs, FoPSAS has come a long way from having just one little dog park next to the old shelter. Today, the new shelter has six outdoor socialization areas, three of which are used regularly for organized canine play groups. In 2012, soon after assuming operation of the shelter, FoPSAS developed a comprehensive dog-walking program with staff and volunteers. And by 2013, they had cautiously introduced dog play groups. To increase the team's confidence, Aimee Sadler of Dogs Playing for Life worked with the FoPSAS staff and volunteers for five days in 2014.

The team loved it and so did the dogs. The shelter staff learned to identify not only which dogs liked to play with other dogs, but how they liked to play and with whom they liked to play. Seeing the dogs outside of their kennels, off-leash and acting like dogs, joyful and carefree, was a scenario the team couldn't get enough of. It motivated them to increase their expertise and to expand this essential lifesaving program.

In addition to play groups, FoPSAS believes in providing each dog with the training and enrichment he or she needs to land a loving home. Each dog is evaluated by the shelter dog trainer and given a behavioral classification that guides staff and volunteers on how to interact and work with the dog. The training program for these volunteers is extremely rigorous, requiring multiple training sessions with increased responsibility as a volunteer completes each tier of the training.

FoPSAS also provides socialization and enrichment for cats. Volunteers at the shelter play with the cats, brush them and cuddle with them, and even read to them. Soon after taking over the operation of the shelter, FoPSAS asked Jackson Galaxy (cat expert and host of Animal Planet's "My Cat from Hell") to come to the shelter and help them figure out how to improve the lives of the cats in their care. Acting upon Jackson's advice, FoPSAS pulled out most of the cat cages, replacing them with open community cat rooms where the felines can perch on windowsills, lounge on cat trees, and socialize with people and other cats. Most of the kittens who arrive at the shelter spend time in foster care, where they receive the intensive care that kittens require and become socialized, getting them ready for adoption.

WHAT WORKED

- Having play groups for the dogs to decrease their stress from being in the shelter and enhance their chances of being adopted
- Removing the cat cages and allowing the cats to live communally, which results in happier, more adoptable cats

WHAT DIDN'T WORK

- Trying to provide enrichment for cats within the original design of the shelter, which housed the cats in individual cages and had only one community cat room
- Providing enrichment for dogs in the interior dog socialization and meet-and-greet areas, which were not designed well and are rarely used

WHAT'S NEXT

- Redesigning the interior dog socialization and meet-and-greet areas
- Expanding the dogs' play group area and growing the dog training and behavioral staff and volunteer core





Marketing and branding

Once FoPSAS was running the shelter, they ramped up their adoption marketing, social media presence, community engagement efforts and relationships with local media. On social media channels, positive and honest messaging is used to share the progress of individual animals, proving to the community that the Palm Springs animal shelter is not dark and depressing, but a place filled with joy and hope for second chances. Another key marketing strategy is educating and empowering staff and volunteers to talk about the shelter.

To ensure that pets' adoption photos and profiles are current and engaging, a volunteer animal marketing team was created, responsible for taking photographs and making videos of every animal available for adoption. FoPSAS also gave this team the tasks of documenting the day-to-day action and tracking the progress of some of the harder-to-place animals.

Marketing is also important to FoPSAS's fundraising efforts. FoPSAS consistently communicates that it truly takes a village to create a public shelter that's a safe haven for animals in need. FoPSAS communicates this message primarily through its appeals via social media and fundraising campaigns, reiterating that everyone has a role to play in helping to create a humane community and that saving lives is not cheap or easy, but it's the right thing to do.

There is also a perception among some community members that money must not be an issue because the shelter is new and attractive. FoPSAS works hard to dispel this myth, reiterating that each year they must match what the city provides as a stipend in order to operate the shelter and continue their lifesaving programs.

WHAT WORKED

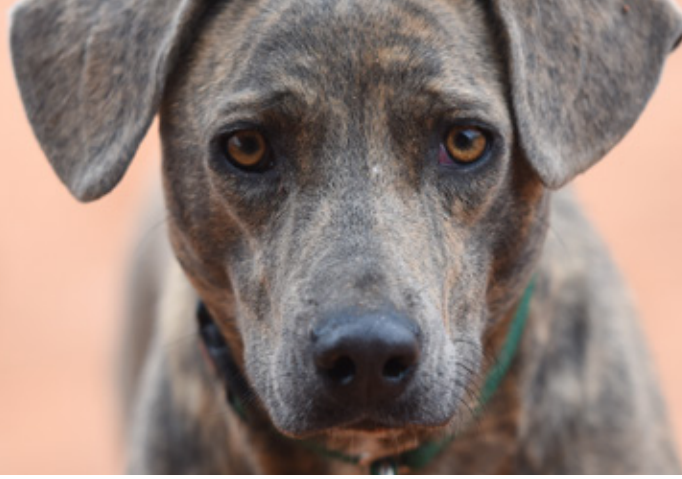
- Forming a marketing committee and developing a brand with consistent visual appeal and messaging
- Investing in marketing and public relations by hiring a director of marketing and development
- Diversifying their marketing approach, using print, electronic, radio, billboard, television and social media to promote campaigns and initiatives

WHAT DIDN'T WORK

- Allowing multiple people (staff and volunteers) to create marketing and promotional materials without centralized oversight

WHAT'S NEXT

- Partnering with local film students to create compelling videos of shelter animals and their team in action
- Creating more branded logo merchandise that will appeal to both residents and visitors



Retention programs and efforts

FoPSAS estimates that about 20 percent of the time, they are successful in helping people to keep their pets rather than surrender them. Because FoPSAS would like to increase that retention rate, they are taking steps to expand retention resources. One major step was hiring a retention counselor in 2015. The retention counselor serves as a liaison to animal control; consults with people prior to surrender of their pets; interviews those bringing in stray or lost animals; negotiates impound, spay/neuter, microchip and vaccination fees with those who retrieve their pets from the shelter; and serves as a back-up for the community cat program coordinator by advising community members on TNR policies and procedures.

FoPSAS knows that it's essential to understand and appreciate just where people are emotionally, mentally, physically and financially when they relinquish or retrieve a pet. Judging them doesn't help, and most often backfires. Respectful discussion, honest dialogue and patient listening are the three most important tools in the retention counselor's tool kit. Next is the ability to determine if it's best to try to help the person keep his or her pet or if it's in the best interest of the animal, and the person, to surrender the animal to the shelter.

The retention counselor can deviate from established fees to encourage the return of a pet to his or her person, and may offer assistance to help those who feel they must relinquish their pets. For example, if someone shows up to claim a stray dog who has been in the shelter's care for several days and that person has limited funds to retrieve the dog, the retention counselor can not only waive or reduce the impound fee, she can offer to provide low-cost or even free spay/neuter, if the animal is not altered, in exchange for the impound fee. If a person shows up heartbroken about having to surrender his beloved cat of many years because he needs to be hospitalized for a period of time and has no one to care for his cat, the retention counselor can help him find a short-term foster care or boarding arrangement.

In addition, to help minimize the tension and anxiety that comes with surrendering a beloved pet or bringing in a lost or stray animal, FoPSAS refreshed the intake area of the shelter, naming it Molly's Welcome Center and adding a large photo of Molly, a sweet, smiling golden retriever, near the entrance.

Other ways that FoPSAS is hoping to increase pet retention are by expanding the pet food bank and by growing funding and community partnerships to develop resources that will assist with pet-friendly housing options, pet behavioral training, in-home pet care for the infirm and elderly, short-term foster care and low-cost veterinary care. Part of this effort will involve educating landlords on the benefits of renting to people with pets and informing them of the injustice and ineffectiveness of breed-specific pet policies.

Finally, Palm Springs, like many communities around the nation, has experienced a rise in homelessness over the past several years. Those living on the street frequently have pets, very often giving up care and food for themselves in order to provide for their pets. In 2016,

FoPSAS received a small grant from Pets of the Homeless to help with basic care for pets belonging to homeless people. FoPSAS considers this type of service to be a fundamental component of a humane community.

WHAT WORKED

- Hiring and training a retention counselor to help both those who are retrieving their pets from the shelter and those who come to the shelter to relinquish pets
- Offering relinquishment appointments to discuss whether it's an option for pets to remain with their families
- Deviating from established fees if necessary to encourage the return of pets to their people

WHAT DIDN'T WORK

- Failing to train volunteers to work in the intake area, which resulted in volunteer burnout and avoidance of the intake area because of the emotional strain

WHAT'S NEXT

- Continuing to do staff and volunteer training to increase retention
- Researching and developing resources within the community, such as pet-friendly rentals, more low-cost or free services and medical aid to pets of people going through difficult times
- Increasing help to the homeless, partnering with established social service organizations in the area





Love Fund

Many of the animals who enter the Palm Springs shelter suffer from “deferred maintenance.” Some have only minor issues that need to be fixed, but others have major problems, such as a severe injury or illness. So, FoPSAS created the Love Fund to support the many animals who need extra medical or behavioral treatment. The Love Fund money, which comes from donations, has been used for double ACL surgery on a beautiful pit bull named January, amputation of a severed leg on a sweet kitten called Slushie, and repair of the eye of an adorable senior poodle named Luke. The level of medical care provided at the shelter is truly on par with the best veterinary clinics because FoPSAS believes shelter animals deserve no less.

Intake numbers

Ironically, one of the biggest challenges facing FoPSAS is the fact that Palm Springs has become known as a safe haven for animals. Many municipalities make up the Coachella Valley, where Palm Springs is located, and all of them, except for Palm Springs, have animal shelter contracts with the county. The Palm Springs shelter is the only open-admission shelter in the Coachella Valley operating under the no-kill philosophy.

The county shelter euthanizes a large number of the cats who enter the shelter. Dogs fare better, but a great deal of improvement is needed in the canine area as well, particularly for pit bull terriers and pit bull mixes. The county shelter has expressed genuine interest in working with FoPSAS and with local rescue groups and animal advocates to help reduce euthanasia and implement lifesaving programs, but it is a slow and laborious undertaking.

Meanwhile, the community looks to the Palm Springs shelter to help with stray animals and owner surrenders, devising creative ways to convince the FoPSAS intake team that the animal was found in Palm Springs or that the owner lives there. And FoPSAS staff cannot blame them for trying. However, the result was a 40 percent increase in intake at the Palm Springs shelter in 2015. Given the fact that the FoPSAS TNR program has grown and the Fix a Friend program is successful, logic would dictate that intake would be decreasing. FoPSAS understands that until the county shelter improves, the Palm Springs shelter will continue to struggle with high intake numbers.



Teaching hospital

FoPSAS believes in the sustaining power of both teaching and learning, and strives to expand both in the shelter and beyond. Students with disabilities volunteer weekly at the shelter and perform various tasks, including doing pet towel laundry and washing food dishes, as well as socializing and bathing animals. High school students apprentice and earn community service credit. Exposing these students to shelter operations gives them a better understanding of the animal welfare world and has encouraged some to become animal advocates in their schools and in their communities.

Veterinary students in years one to three rotate through the shelter medicine club to assist in spay/neuter surgeries for community cats. The students learn about the philosophy and principles of TNR and the positive impact that a TNR program has in a community, as well as the technical skills of anesthetic procedure from beginning to recovery. There is typically a waiting list for the program because potential students learn about the value of the experience from alumni and are eager for the hands-on opportunity.

Additionally, fourth-year veterinary students participate in a month-long rotation during which they are taught to successfully perform spay and neuter surgeries with direct veterinary supervision, observe any other surgeries that occur in the shelter, assist with vaccine clinics, and participate in rounds and treatment plans of the shelter animals. By opening up the shelter to students, from high school to veterinary medical school students, FoPSAS hopes to inspire more shelter medicine professionals and, at the very least, expose students to the lifesaving work being done in public shelters.

Relationship with animal control

While FoPSAS operates the shelter, they do not manage animal control in Palm Springs. That function continues to be part of the Palm Springs police department. Because much of what happens in the field affects intake and retention at the shelter, having a good working relationship with animal control is critical.

So, FoPSAS focuses on working with animal control to create a partnership that better serves community members, offering retention solutions when appropriate and creating a network of community animal advocates who can help to be the eyes and ears for the city's small animal control staff. In the spirit of collaboration, Dr. Shayda Ahkami, director of shelter and veterinary services, has made herself available to assist police and animal control officers in the field in cases when animals require on-the-spot medical care or sedation for transportation.



Humane legislation

FoPSAS also believes in tackling legal issues in order to improve the lives of pets in the community. In the fall of 2015, hearing of a pet store's tentative plans to expand from Palm Desert to Palm Springs, FoPSAS took the preemptive step of initiating an ordinance banning the retail sale of cats and dogs in Palm Springs. (Most dogs sold in pet stores come from puppy mills.) The city council unanimously passed the ordinance.

FoPSAS sees room for improvement in the city's animal-related ordinances and plans to work with the city and local advocates to inventory, review and recommend model ordinances that will better serve and protect both the citizens and animals of Palm Springs. For guidance and support in crafting the proposed ordinances, FoPSAS will look to Best Friends Animal Society and other industry experts.



Presenters



Tamara Hedges

Tamara Hedges has been a passionate animal advocate since she could walk — rescuing puppies, kittens, bunnies and birds as a young child. Her volunteer work with animal shelters and rescue groups started in the late 1980s with the San Francisco SPCA, where she was a mobile adoption counselor; a trap-neuter-return (TNR) trapper, transporter and advocate; and a volunteer in the ethical studies department.

Soon after moving to Palm Springs, California, Tamara became involved in helping the city move to a more humane way of caring for shelter animals. She joined the Friends of Palm Springs Animal Shelter (FoPSAS) board of directors in 2008 and was instrumental in helping the city build a new state-of-the-art shelter in 2011 and implement lifesaving programs.

When not working at her daytime job as the executive director of the Palm Desert Center at the University of California, Riverside, Tamara devotes her time to her position as vice president of FoPSAS. Tamara believes her 25 years as an administrator in higher education have aided her in developing effective programs for the Palm Springs animal shelter and community, knowing education to be the key to real change and sustainable progress.



Dr. Shayda Ahkami

Dr. Shayda Ahkami is the director of shelter and veterinary services for the Palm Springs Animal Shelter (PSAS) in Palm Springs, California. PSAS is proud to be an open-admission shelter operating under the no-kill philosophy, the only one of its kind in the Coachella Valley. Shayda has served on the board of directors for FoPSAS since August 2013, demonstrating her unwavering commitment to the PSAS mission of saving lives and donating her skills and expertise in the surgery suite.

She continues to be a leader in the no-kill movement by acting as co-chair for the No Kill Coachella Valley coalition. She also serves as a non-voting member of the Coachella Valley Animal Campus Commission, a group of city officials who contract with the local county shelter, as a representative for the no-kill model. In addition, Shayda is a strong opponent of declawing, as she has seen the mutilation and adverse effects firsthand. She acts as director for the Coachella Valley Paw Project, a group of dedicated experts who educate people about the cruel act of declawing with the hope of ending that practice.

Shayda graduated from St. George University in Grenada, West Indies, and is currently pursuing her master's degree in veterinary forensics through the University of Florida. Prior to earning her veterinary degree, she worked as a wildlife rehabilitator for 11 years at the Fund for Animals Wildlife Rehabilitation Center. During that time, she also worked intensively against the illegal exotic pet industry, another aspect of animal welfare that she strongly opposes. She holds memberships in the American Veterinary Medical Association, the Society of Animal Welfare Administrators and the State Humane Association of California.